DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 365 FL 017 342

AUTHOR Waltman, John L.
TITLE Culture Shock as a Barrier to Intercultural Business Communication.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 11p.; In: Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions. Conference Proceedings; see FL 017 281.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Communication Problems; *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cross Cultural Training; *Culture Conflict; Higher Education; Intercultural Communication; Languages for Special Purposes; Travel

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of culture shock as it affects intercultural business communication is examined. The symptoms of the syndrome and its effects on the business traveler and his/her business are discussed. Flaws in current training that increase rather than reduce the impact of culture shock are explored. It is suggested that much training prepares prospective international travelers for only the most basic functions without touching on the areas that will enhance or reduce communication, or equipping them to do business effectively and cope with an alien environment. Recommendations for improving cross-cultural training are made. Information is drawn from research on culture shock and information theory and from personal experience with culture shock. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

1005

ED293365

CULTURE SHOCK AS A BARRIER TO INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

by

John L. Waltman, Ph.D.
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197

Presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Languages
and Communication for World Business and the Professions
sponsored by Eastern Michigan University
Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 7-9, 1987

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Voght

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL017342

CULTURE SHOCK AS A BARRIER TO INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

John L. Waltman, Ph.D.
Eastern Michigan University

INTRODUCTION

Culture shock, the predictable result of immersion into a new environment, represents a formidable barrier to effective international business communication. To the sojourner starting a lengthy tour of duty, culture shock is too often the cause of premature termination or at least markedly reduced efficiency. It can be costly in both tangible and intangible terms unless it is properly handled.

This paper explores the phenomenon of culture shock as it impacts on intercultural business communication. It first sets out the symptomology of the syndrome and explores the effects on the business sojourner and his/her communication.

It then explores the flaws in most current training that actually increase rather than reduce culture shock's impact on sojourners, flaws that trainees are ironically in part responsible for perpetuating. Thus, rather than providing communication skills that will equip a sojourner to do business effectively and cope with the alien environment, much training prepares one merely for the most basic functions without touching on the areas that will make (or break) one as a communicator.

The paper closes with suggestions for improved training which can help sojourners achieve the appropriate equilibrium and succeed in conducting business overseas. The material for this presentation is drawn in part from research on culture shock and information theory, and in part from my own experiences with culture shock while in Peace Corps.

DEFINITION

The first detailed discussion of culture shock was Oberg's: "Culture shock is precipated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and

one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situation of daily life" [Oberg, 1961, p.177]. For the sojourner, what had been so predictable in the home environment, what had served to reinforce the exchange of information (through redundancy), is no longer available. Instead, the sojourner finds that all familiar communication landmarks are either gone, or, if present, have entirely different meanings from what they had in the native culture. The foreign receiver also may be confused since what appears to be a familiar set of signs may be interpreted in the light of the new culture. [Ronen, 1986, p. 95] The disequilibrium that this confusion signals will not be resolved until the sojourner has adjusted to the new culture, if that ever occurs.

The specific physical and mental symptoms of culture shock vary depending on the individual, but they follow certain patterns. These include excessive concern over health or cleanliness, a sense of helplessness, a fear of exploitation, a longing for home and old friends, and general irritability. These are frequently accompanied by stress symptoms brought on by the overall situation [J. Bennett, 1977, p.46]. The sojourner's attitude is frequently shaped by the frustration over diet, digestion, housing, and transportation. Craig notes that the sojourner will also engage in excessive washing of hands, have an absent-minded faraway stare, excessive fatigue, and engage in excessive drinking.[1979, p.160].

Culture shock will run through four major stages before the expatriate resolves the matter. In the first stage (lasting anywhere from a few days to six months) the newcomer finds the host country fascinating. Dorothy in <u>The Wizard of Oz</u> is at this stage when she says "Something tells me we're not in Kansas anymore, Todo." Frequently, the first few experiences in the new culture are eased by others who try to make the individual feel welcome. But reality eventually intrudes, and the sojourner must cope with it in a variety of ways including dietary, domestic, and job-related. This is Dorothy's stage in Oz when she says "Now I know we're not in Kansas anymore!"

At this point, the second stage of the syndrome, the traveler has no choice but to interpret events in the light of his or her own experience and commences to do just that. Seeking meaning, the sojourner tends to generalize the acts of individual personality types. In this stage, the sojourner attempts to discover familiar patterns in the new culture (and in doing so begins to construct cultural stereotypes), and is seeking to impose her/his own order and meaning onto this new world. This natural tendency Milton Bennett calls "sympathy" in that one is trying to interpret events as if they were being carried out in a familiar culture [1979, p.411].

Unfortunately, all of this often makes little or no sense. As the expatriate tries to impose the meanings that events, words, and actions would have in his or her own native culture, little or nothing computes. The severity of culture shock depends, of course, on the amount of difference between the two cultures and the amount of travel experience the individual has previously had [Hays, 1972, p.88].

This second stage is the crisis stage of the culture shock syndrome and is compounded by the natives' seeming indiffernce to the problems. Here is the poor expatriate trying to make sense out of it all and no one seems to care. And at this point the expatriate will lash out and condemn "them" for their crazy ways of doing things. The negative impact on business communications is obvious here!

At the third stage, the choice is now either fight or flight [Craig, 1979, pp.168-170] Unfortunately, before getting to this third stage, many individuals find the second stage so overwhelming that they decide to quit. Rahim reports that the rate of return he found in a 1983 study was from 25-40% [1983, p.312]. Peace Corps programs have had as much as a 60% dropout rate for overseas trainees. For the individuals who decide to see the situation through, the situation seems nearly overwhelming. Despite that, they determine to handle the matter. How this is done depends on a number of variables which will also determine just how successful the person becomes as a businessperson in the new environment. The truly successful ones are those who pass through the fourth stage and learn to accept the "foreign" way as just one other way of doing things. After this stage, life becomes more tolerable, though never simple [Oberg, 1961, pp. 178-9].

Resolution of culture shock can take several courses, not all of which encourage effective business communication. One option is xenophobia; the other culture is totally rejected. In this instance, departure is probably the best resolution. Some practice a less harmful variant and become members of "The American Colony" and hide out in the compound. At the other extreme is xenophilia; the sojourner embraces the new culture and rejects the old (something that happens occasionally with Peace Corps Volunteers). Although the latter option seems desirable, it is not. The sojourner orginally came to share a culture that he or she now totally rejects. Efficiency suffers naturally. A balanced approach is probably the best. While the individual's feelings towards the new culture may not be neutral, they are not strong either way. Thus, the individual can function (and communicate) in the new culture without losing perspective on the old. In fact, the self-effacing sojourner may be

seen as highly suspect and insincere by the native population which expects a difference [Craig, 1979, p.11].

Impact on Business Communication

How all of this confusion impacts on business communication can easily be seen. The disoriented expatriate businessperson frustrated by endless anxieties finds his or her communication deteriorating. Not only is this new culture confusing, but life must go on as normally as possible if one is to keep one's position. Appointments must be kept, acquaintances made, and problems resolved. Rahim [1983, p.313] notes that key expatriate executives may be called on to communicate in six major categories:

External relations
Headquarters relations
Family relations
Internal relations
Home government relations
Host government relations

Clearly, an expatriate might very well be expected to be an effective communicator. Yet, when the culture shock bound businessperson tries to carry on as he or she would normally, results are less than satisfactory or even non-existant.

While the old familiar ways do not work, they are often all that the new expatriate has to call on. The result is anxiety. J. Bennett notes that "two very contradictory systems vie for equal time. All we have held sacred is reflected in a distortion mirror, and the image flashed back throws us off balance, a sort of cultural fun-house whose previous orientations contribute little or nothing to the survival of the psyche [1977, p.47]. As Hays notes, "most of the rules relating to behavior standards are culture bound in the sense that they are uniquely generated and taught to help the individual get along in that particular culture" [1972, p88]. In the new culture, one not only does not know what to do but feels thwarted by being unable to act. The individual "is left with a void in the set of assumptions upon which he can base his behavior and expectations." [Hays, 1972, p.88].

And, for the expatriate with no skills in the new language, much of the problem may lie with Sapir and Whorf's theory that language provides a guide to social reality as well as a communication medium. For these two, language influences perceptions and transmits thoughts, as well as helping pattern them. It is a frame of reference that determines the perceptions and thoughts of cultural members. Thus, the differing labels for signs or concepts may also indicate different thought processes are involved. [1976, p.49]

Being immersed in the whole situation, the individual often does not even realize that he or she is suffering from culture shock. Ironically, the trainee may never have run into the concept in training [Hays, 1972, p. 88]. Frustration and depression result since the traveler forgets the need for self examination and analysis of relationships with others [Maddox, 1971, p28]. Finding that time-tried techniques for interaction simply do not work, the frustrated sojourner may abandon all support systems that just might see him or her through.

Just why culture shock has such a profound effect on business (or any other type of) communication is not far to seek. Samovar and Porter's [1976, p. 10] communication variables determined by culture are of value here because they clearly illustrate why this clash is so great:

1. Attitudes
2. Social Organization
3. Thought Patterns
4. Roles
5. Language Skill
6. Space
7. Time Sense
8. Nonverbal Communication

By their very nature, these variables are going to affect the long-term businessperson. The thought patterns for example, are going to create problems as the North American sender follows one pattern and his Saudi Arabian counterpart another. Or the roles to be played can interfere as the North American superior tries to get her Indian subordinate to engage in participative management.

Or consider the North American who is doing a slow backwards dance across the room as his Greek counterpart repeatedly closes in on his space all the while wondering just why the North American is so unfriendly. Or what of the sojourner who arrives promptly for a meeting with the Emir only to find that others are already waiting for earlier appointments. And, when the Emir finally sees the American, others interrupt repeatedly to the latter's annoyance.

Culture shock, plain and simple, is a communication problem. If effective communication involves the mutual exchange of information which precedes right action, it cannot be achieved if one of the parties cannot effectively encode the messages that he/she wishes to send or accurately decode those received. The sojourner attempts to interpret what is perceived but has only the light of her or his own experience as a guide. And in the new culture, entirely new patterns are involved. At the minimum, two separate symbol systems are being applied by the two communicators. And the commonality of background may range from slight to nil.

Culture shock should come as no surprise, then. The expatriate, used to the familiar communication patterns of his or her own culture, applies meaning to what is being seen, unconsciously of course. While the person cannot help but be aware that the two cultures (his/her own and the new one) are different, he/she has not yet realized just to what extent they differ. It is not a matter of just adopting a few gestures, learning a few polite phrases and avoiding using the left hand; the whole symbol system differs, and radical adjustments must be made. Craig [1979, p.166] notes that the individual "comes to understand that people are not necessarily bound by universal patterns of mutual understanding." The expatriate in this situation can be likened to an individual facing a group with an inside joke. The expatriate knows that something is wrong, but cannot pin it down. Only the situation is no joke.

TRAINING PROBLEMS

If one were conducting training for sojourners, the seemingly obvious solution would be to orient the sojourner to what s/he will be able to expect in the new culture based on Samovar and Porter's list. Once the sojourner learned the basics, s/he could be shipped over with no problems. But problems do result, training does go awry. Just why it does is not far to seek.

Stewart provides an overview of training programs which considerably clarifies the situation. He suggests that the fault lies in part with the sojourner and in part with the training received. When the sojourner first learns of the impending overseas assignment, he/she is usually initially concerned with geographical, cultural, and social issues. This would seem to be the logical foci for the training. However, as the departure date approaches, many travellers, especially the unseasoned, begin to "fear threats to health, personal hardships, and social complexities...concrete factors which affect and may endanger well-being." [1971, p.19]. Potential travelers convey these concerns to trainers which in turn leads them to develop lists of do's and donts, or so-called "dissatisfiers" rather than programs which provide information on the new culture and adapting to it. To cite one example, Craig surveyed training for expatriates working in Malaysia and found that only 16 percent of them had been offered cultural orientation. [1979, p.173] Or to cite another, a table in Bovee and Thill's basic business communication text shows the students "How to say it: Some Basic English in Translation." The student learns greetings, learns how to pardon him/herself, and how to deal with money and postal problems, but no more. Similarly, the sojourner who gets his/her way in training may end learning no more than how to find restrooms or order in restaurants as well as how to say "hello" or "excuse me" in the new situation. In doing so,

the sojourner assures him/herself that minor inconveniences (dissatisfiers) will be avoided. However, while dissatisfaction in the new culture may decline, satisfaction does not rise.

The satisfiers, "positive factors or working conditions and life-style which are meaningful to the individual" [Stewart, 1977, p.20], fit in with Maslow's self-actualizing elements and are not as easily defined or as easily attained in the new culture. Thus, the lower needs on Maslow's hierarchy are attainable, but not the higher.

And, if the sojourner is to be comfortable in the long run, the satisfiers have the greatest long-term value. But because so many sojourners devote their attention before departure on immediate survival matters, the more valuable skills, including communication, get neglected in training [Stewart, 1977, p.20]. The need for these becomes apparent once the traveller begins to settle in. As Stewart notes: "Beneath the hard surfaces of survival issues, the traveler has from the beginning confronted the deeper levels of cultural differences, which are typically perceived in nonverbal communication such as the traveler's use of time...or of space...tone of voice, facial expressions, posture and body movement" [Stewart, 1977, p.21]. In the face of this training which has neglected the key concerns, culture shock will often follow.

But what is adequate training? What does the sojourner need in order to minimize culture shock? The key may lie in Samovar and Porter's list of communication variables determined by culture. A thorough grounding in the culture is a must for the businessperson hoping to stay long term in the new culture. Probably the hardest of these elements would be language, but competent interpreters are available (but not always hired) to help in that area. Then, the training could concentrate on the other elements:

Attitudes
Social Organization
Thought Patterns
Roles
Use of Space and Time
Nonverbal Signals

Training should also include the concept of culture shock. The sojourner should know what it is when it hits him or her in order to combat it as well as what its causes and symptoms are.

The knowledge of the new culture and increased self awareness can help the sojourner see the environment from the native's perspective. This empathy (to use Milton Bennett's term) permits an individual to see others acting

within a framework that has meaning to them. At the same time, the individual is able to maintain his or her identity even as he/she understands the other.

Space is inadequate to give full details on Milton Bennett's concept of empathy, but a brief sketch is possible. In the new cultural setting, as the sojourner learns that past patterns are inadequate, he or she must learn to see the environment form the natives' perspective. Instead of seeking meaning in terms of past experience (which is only natural), Bennett argues that it is now necesary to apply empathy, his "platinum rule" which replaces the Golden Rule. Instead of doing unto others as one would have done unto oneself, one does unto others as they would have done unto them.

Bennett sets out six steps to achieving empathy. In following these steps, the sojourner gains insights into his/her own cultural assumptions and is able to separate these from the cultural assumptions of the host culture. To protect oneself from ego loss, the individual always maintains his/her own cultural identity, but is able to keep that separate in interpreting the new culture [M. Bennett, 1979, pp.419-422]

CONCLUSIONS

Culture shock can indeed devastate international business communication as it attacks the very basis of communication: perception. As the communicator attempts to interpret signs (sensory experience) in the light of experience, chaos results when nothing makes sense in the new context. At the very least, business relations are crippled, but if nothing is done to allay its effects, culture shock may force the businessperson to terminate the whole project. The key lies in proper training which focuses not just on the dissatisfiers, but also on the communication variables set out by Samovar and Porter. And training should bring in Bennett's theory of empathy. Also necessary is a clear awareness of the symptomology and resolution of the whole syndrome,

REFERENCES

Bennett, Janet, "Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock into Perspective," International and Intercutural Communication Annual, 4 (1977), pp. 45-50.

Bennett, Milton J., "Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy," Communication Yearbook 3, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-Interactional Communication Association, 1979, p. 408-422.

Craig, Jo Ann, Culture Shock, Singapore: Times Books International, 1979.

Hall, Edward T., and William Foote Whyte, "Intercultural Communication: A Guide to Men of Action," Human Organization, 19, (1966), pp. 5-12.

Hays, Richard D., Business Horizons, June, 1972, pp. 87-3.

Maddox, Robert C. "Problems and Trends in Assigning Managers Overseas," Personnel, 48 (January-February, 1971), pp. 53-56.

Oberg, Kalervo, "Culture Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments," Practical Anthropology, 1961, pp. 177-182.

Rahim, Afzalur, "A Model for Developing Key Expatriate Executives," Personnel Journal, April, 1983, pp. 312-317.

Ronen, Simcha. Comparative and Multinational Management. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986.

Samovar, Larry A. and Richard E. Porter, Intercultural Communication: A Reader, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1976.

Samovar, L. A., R.E. Porter, and N.C. Jain. Understanding Intercultural Communication. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981.

Stewart, Edward C., "The Survival Stage of Intercultural Communication," International and Intercultural Communication Annual, 4 (1977), pp. 17-31.